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# Investigating preschool children's attachment styles and peer relationships<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate preschool children's attachment styles and peer relationships. The sample group of the study, in which a relational survey method was used, was comprised of 30 children (15 girls and 15 boys), aged 6, attending kindergartens of primary schools located in the centre of Denizli. For the study, teachers completed Ladd & Profilet Child Behaviour Scale and the Peer Victimization Scale. Incomplete stories with doll family was applied to children individually by the researchers to define children's attachment styles.

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**Keywords:** Peer relationships, attachment styles, 5-6 year old children.

## 1. Introduction

Attachment behaviour is a predictable behaviour that is a product of increased closeness towards the attachment figure (generally the mother). Some attachment behaviours such as smiling and making noises display the interest of a child towards interaction, send warning signs to the mother, and ultimately, the mother satisfies the needs of the child (Cassidy, 1999). Children form attachment relationships with those that are important in their lives. This is a child's first social experience (Bush, 2001). According to Bowlby (1980), getting personally attached to other people is an important life-changing issue, and is not just valid during infancy or school, but is effective throughout an individual's life. The attachment at the start of an individual's life will set the path for that individual's fight for life and how much joy they get out of life. Bowlby (1980) believes that parent attachment lasts for a lifetime and not just during infancy. A child displays target-orientated behaviour around the age of three. During the fourth stage, language development (among other skills) gives a child the opportunity to understand their mother's world, enabling them to think about their desires and plans according to their own behaviours. Even though a child's parent attachment continues with wide effects during their school years, its importance gradually decreases for the child (Belsky and Cassidy, 1994). Ainsworth points out that the number of studies that address parent attachment at later ages is limited. Some clinicians believe that the nature of the relationship never changes; it is always from the child to the parent. On the contrary, other clinicians believe that the interaction between an adult, child, and father is like a close friend or peer (Belsky, & Cassidy, 1994).

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The purpose of this study is to investigate preschool children's attachment styles and peer relationships. Answers will be sought to the following questions in accordance with this purpose:

- Is there a relationship between preschool children's attachment styles and peer relationships (aggression, prosocial behaviour, asocial behavior, excluded, fearful-anxiety, hyperactivity-distractibility and victimisation) ?
- Do preschool children's attachment styles predict their peer relationships (aggression, prosocial behaviour, asocial behavior, excluded, fearful-anxiety, hyperactivity-distractibility and victimisation) ?

## 2. Method

Relational survey method was used in this study.

### 2. 1. Participants

Thirty 6 year old children participated in this study. The population of the study comprised of 6 year old children, attending the kindergarten class of primary schools affiliated to the Ministry of National Education, located in city center of Denizli. Sample group of the research was selected by using random sampling method. The participants were selected from one kindergarten class at one primary school. Fifteen (50.0 %) of the children were girls, whereas 15 (50.0 %) were boys. The average age of the children was 6 years, 1 months, 2 days (minimum, 5 years, 7 months, 10 days; maximum, 6 years, 9 months). All the children included in the study had normal development characteristic.

### 2.2.Measures

**2.2.1.The Child Behaviour Scale:** This scale is a measurement tool, developed by Ladd and Profilet in 1996, to evaluate the peer relations of preschool children according to the information provided by teachers. The scale consists of 6 subscales and 44 items. The subscales are aggression with peers, prosocial behaviour with peers, asocial behaviour with peers, anxiety-fear, exclusion by peers, hyperactivity-distractibility. All subscales of the Child Behaviour Scale were used in this research. All scale items are scored as "Never," "Sometimes," and "Always." The internal consistency coefficient for the original version's subscale "Aggression with Peers" was .92, the internal consistency coefficient for the subscale "Prosocial Behaviour with Peers" was .88, the internal consistency coefficient for the subscale "Asocial Behaviour with Peers" was .88, the internal consistency coefficient for the subscale "Anxiety-Fear" was .79, the internal consistency coefficient for the subscale "Exclusion by Peers" was .96, and the internal consistency coefficient for the subscale "Hyperactivity-Distractibility" was .93 (Ladd & Profilet, 1996). The internal consistency coefficient for the Turkish version subscales were .87 for "Aggression with Peers," .91 for "Prosocial Behaviours with Peers," .84 for "Asocial Behaviours with Peers," .78 for "Anxiety-Fear," .89 for "Exclusion by Peers," and the internal consistency coefficient for the subscale "Hyperactivity-Distractibility" was .83 (Gülay, 2008).

All subscales were used in this study. The internal consistency coefficient for the Turkish version subscales were .85 for "Aggression with Peers," .93 for "Prosocial Behaviours with Peers," .86 for "Asocial Behaviours with Peers," .75 for "Anxiety-Fear," .85 for "Exclusion by Peers," and the internal consistency coefficient for the subscale "Hyperactivity-Distractibility" was .81 for this study.

**2.2.2.The Incomplete Stories with Doll Family (ISDF):** It has been developed by Cassidy (1988) for children at the age of six. This scale is a kind of scale which is applied as baby's telling six stories, each of which lasts about three minutes, relevant to her family. Children are expected to word their mental representation about their attachment state via these stories. Through this scale, children's confidence relation with their mothers can be discovered. The

validity and reliability study of the scale was studied by Cassidy (1988). The consistency of the scale with "Cassidy Puppet Interview", "the Harter's Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children" and "Cassidy Self- Interview" scales is found to be between .47-.67. On the other hand, Alpha reliability coefficient is identified as .78 and test-retest coefficient as .63. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Seven. The variance described by the only factor identified in conclusion of exploratory factor analysis was 55.92%. The factor structure tested as a result of confirmatory factor analysis proved that it was in compliance with real data. Internal consistency was examined to determine the reliability of the scale. The Cronbach alpha (.83) and Spearman Brown split-half test correlation (.83) were calculated in order to achieve this purpose. (Seven, 2006). Each scale was graded compatible with their detail by five graduated scale. Stories reflecting secure relation with attachment figure were given grades upper end of the scale (4-5). Moreover, each story can be placed practically into three classified groups. In stories classified as secure, the character the child identified in the name of the doll was valuable; its relation with her mother was important, special and warm. The child was open to meet her mother in stressful situations. The child had a tendency to return to her mother in order to protect against stressful situation and to be in safe. Generally there is a positive result. In the stories classified as avoidance, the child talking in the name of the doll separated from the mother and/or was pushed and did not accept the significance of the relation. In stressful situations, the child denied the existence of obstacle coming inside or outside the family. She didn't accept her need for family help. If there is a successful solution, it is completely belong to her. In the stories classified as negative/ hostile, the child that represented the doll had behaviors including violence, hostility, negative and strangeness. She didn't have good normal relation with her mother. Coding was done word for word by the ones who have never met the child before. Each story was coded individually by encoders who didn't have prior information about the child. The aim of coding each story independently is to protect the coding of answers given to stories from halo effect (Seven, 2006).

*2.2.3. The Peer Victimization Scale:* This scale is a measurement tool, developed by Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd in 2002, for children aged between 5 and 6. The teachers completed the scale. The scale includes four items, each of which focuses on one of the four types of peer aggression (physical, indirect, direct, and general). Each item was scored as "Never," "Sometimes," and "Always." The internal consistency coefficient for the original scale was .91 (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). In 2008, Gülay (2008) carried out linguistic equivalence, reliability, and validity studies for the scale. The internal consistency coefficient for the Turkish version was .72. The internal consistency coefficient for the scale was .75 for this study.

### *2.3. Procedure*

The Child Behaviour Scale and The Peer Victimization Scale were completed separately for each child by preschool teachers. Teachers have marked the measurements according to their general observations of the children on a period of approximately eight months. Before the application, researchers informed the teachers about the scales and the objective of the research. Incomplete stories with doll family was applied to children individually by the researchers for to define children's attachment styles. The scale was applied in an empty room allocated in the school. The duration of the Incomplete stories with doll family was 15 minutes.

### *2.4. Data Analysis*

A SPSS 13.0 package programme was used to analyse data obtained from the research. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient and Basic Linear Regression Technique were used to analyse data. The Basic Linear Regression Analysis technique was used to establish the predictive effect attachment styles had on the aggression, prosocial behaviour, asocial behavior, excluded, fearful-anxiety, hyperactivity-distractibility and victimisation.

### 3. Tables

Table 1. Descriptive statistic, means, standard deviations, and correlations matrix

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Attachment styles	19.90	4.84	--						
2. Aggression	11.70	4.81	-.68**	--					
3. Prosocial behaviour	18.93	7.67	.65**	.96**	--				
4. Asocial behavior	13.07	5.09	-.57**	.90**	.86**	--			
5. Excluded	14.63	5.19	-.40*	.53**	.55**	.53**	--		
6. Fearful-anxiety	18.43	7.29	-.65**	.96**	.99**	.86**	.56**	--	
7. Hyperactivity-distractibility	3.13	.94	-.63**	.82**	.89**	.68**	.45*	.91**	--
8. Victimization	2.97	1.03	-.43*	.71**	.75**	.67**	.40*	.75**	.82**

Note: n = 30 \* p < .05, \*\* p < .001

Table 1 illustrates a negative and strong significant relationship between the score that the attachment styles and aggression, asocial behavior, excluded, fearful-anxiety, hyperactivity-distractibility and victimisation ( $p < .05$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Also there is a positive and strong significant relationship between the score that the attachment styles and prosocial behaviour ( $p < 0.001$ ). In other words, it can be said that as the attachment styles level increased, the prosocial behaviour level increased. Also, the the attachment styles level decreased, the children's aggression aggression, asocial behavior, excluded, fearful-anxiety, hyperactivity-distractibility and victimisation levels increased.

Table 2. The results of the basic linear regression analysis between attachment styles and and peer relationships (aggression, prosocial behaviour, asocial behavior, excluded, fearful-anxiety, hyperactivity-distractibility and victimisation)

Variables	$\beta$	t
Attachment styles Aggression $R = .68$ $R^2 = .47$ $F(1,29) = 24.527^{**}$	-.68	-4.953**
Attachment styles Prosocial behaviour $R = .65$ $R^2 = .42$ $F(1,29) = 20.364^{**}$	.65	4.513**
Attachment styles Asocial behavior $R = .57$ $R^2 = .32$ $F(1,29) = 13.438^{**}$	-.57	-3.666**
Attachment styles Excluded $R = .39$ $R^2 = .16$ $F(1,29) = 5.242^*$	-.40	-2.289*
Attachment styles Fearful-anxiety $R = .65$ $R^2 = .42$ $F(1,29) = 20.795^{**}$	-.65	-4.560**
Attachment styles Hyperactivity-distractibility $R = .63$ $R^2 = .39$ $F(1,29) = 18.261^{**}$	-.63	-4.273**
Attachment styles Victimization $R = .43$ $R^2 = .18$ $F(1,29) = 6.292^*$	-.42	-2.508*

Note: n = 30 \* p < .05, \*\* p < .001

Note: n = 30 \* p < .05, \*\* p < .001

Table 2 illustrates that attachment styles separately significantly predicted aggression, prosocial behaviour, asocial behavior, excluded, fearful-anxiety, hyperactivity-distractibility and victimisation variables. The level of significance was 0.05 and 0.001 for each basic linear regression analysis conducted in this study. The attachment styles accounted for 47 % ( $p < 0.001$ ) of the children's aggression, 42 % ( $p < 0.05$ ) of the children's prosocial behaviour, 32 % ( $p < 0.001$ ) of the children's asocial behavior ( $p < 0.001$ ), 16 % ( $p < 0.05$ ) of the children's excluded, 42 % ( $p < 0.001$ ) of the children's fearful-anxiety, 39 % ( $p < 0.001$ ) of the children's hyperactivity-distractibility and 18 % ( $p < 0.05$ ) of the children's victimisation. According to results, attachment styles most predicted the aggression in the peer relations of children, and least predicted the excluded in the peer relations of children.

#### 4. Discussion

Study results concluded that attachment styles of 6 year olds had a significant predictor effect on peer relation variables. In other words, children with a secure attachment to their mothers displayed prosocial behaviours towards their peers. Similarly, children that did not have a secure attachment to their mothers displayed aggression towards their peers, asocial behaviours towards their peers, were excluded by their peers, were fearful-anxious towards their peers, were hyperactive in peer relationships, and subjected to victimisation by their peers. In summary, the attachment styles of 6 year old children has an effect on the peer relation variables of children.

Our study results overlap with results of previous studies conducted on the subject. The most important purpose of current studies is that they prove how internal working models in early attachment relations form the basis of other relationship expectations of children. To a certain extent the attachment theory argues that early attachment relation with the mother affects and shapes peer relationships of children in later years (Bretherton, 1985). A child re-creates early attachment relations when they develop new relationships with their peers (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986, pg. 51-71). Children that have an internal working model with sensitive mothers, are loved, and have a secure attachment, expect positive relationships and suitable reactions from their peers. On the contrary, children that feel insecure, and perceive other children as insensitive and distanced re-create early attachment experiences involuntarily in their peer relationships. In conclusion, peer relations are below the optimal level, and children develop unsuccessful relationships. This mechanism is directly proportional to Bowlby's hypothesis "the quality of attachment is indicator of peer social competency" (Mitchell-Copeland, 1996, pg. 7).

Study results conclude that trainings should be offered to expecting mothers related to the importance of attachment in a child's development, childcare, and education. Guidance should be offered to expecting mothers in order for them to establish positive, warm, and close relationships with their babies.

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